

Only Six Months

I threw my backpack over my shoulder. My sister's blue one was already slung over hers. Her golden blonde hair was so long and her blue eyes so sad. The years had taken their toll on her. They had taken their toll on me. Her skin was pale and her lips were set tightly together. With no energy she just stood there, waiting for the world to once again take control of her life. She was hardened. Anyone else looking at her would never be able to read the pain that ran so deeply through her. As we gave each other a knowing look, I turned the cold metal doorknob allowing the door to squeak open. The outside air was brisk. I could feel my cheeks and nose turn red. Trying to numb myself, I withdrew and became completely lost to the world. My sister could tell. Just as I could see her sadness and pain, she could see mine. We waited outside for Caroline as she finished talking to our mother. What more could there be to say? When we left the first time, it was for a year. This time was only going to be six months. My mother promised.

Caroline, the social worker, finally appeared in the doorway. Her feathered, brown hair was slightly displaced by the cool breeze; she had deep lines on her face. Through low-income buildings covered in faded shingles, she led the way down the long sidewalk to her car. I imagined happy families living their lives behind those weathered walls. I tried not to step on any of the cracks as I kept my eyes fixed on the sidewalk. A child's game to occupy my mind. I certainly did not want to break my mother's back. The sidewalk gave way to a gravelly parking lot. The kind that was so rough that I could feel the pieces of gravel trying to push through the soles of my cheap sneakers. A typical gray sedan, common for 1992, was parked at the curb. I thought it was so fancy. My sister and I got in.

I shivered as I buckled the seatbelt on the passenger's seat of the car. It was the day after Thanksgiving and I was a thin and bony eleven-year-old. Yesterday I had celebrated all I was

thankful for just to have it swept out from beneath me today. At least I still had my sister. We'd been together through everything so far. We could handle anything the world threw at us as long as we had each other.

"It's only for six months..." Caroline droned on. I was unable to pay attention to anything she was saying. All I could hear was the heater roaring. It seemed so loud. I wished it would drown out my thoughts. It didn't.

Where am I going? I sat there in disbelief as I stared at all of the naked trees. Why was this happening to me? To Tiffany? To us? Hadn't we endured enough in the short decade we'd shared? Did we really have to endure more?

Mary. That's what I thought Caroline said her name was. She spoke in a detached sort of way and, even at eleven, I knew she had done this spiel a million times before. Mary was to be our new mother. Kind of ironic with the impending holiday.

Caroline was still talking. I didn't register much of what she said. "...two sons... really nice... only six months... lucky..." What did all of this mean? Could a complete stranger really become our mother? Were we really getting two new brothers? Could a new family, even if they are nice, really be as good as the one I already have? Six months with them. Does that really make me lucky? I still have my sister. No matter what, I still have Tiffany. The air stung my eyes.

Slowing the car, Caroline turned left. According to the little green sign, the name of the road was Little Avenue. Little. Weird how little I felt at that very moment. The first house on the left was a nice white one. Was that our new home? I couldn't believe how nice the houses on this block were. The next house was a little blue one with a front porch made of unfinished wood. Although not as fancy as the white one, I still sat there in disbelief at the idea of living in a

house. The number eighteen was posted on the front like a beacon. Caroline pulled into the driveway lining the right side of what was to be our new shelter. I was nervous. Were they going to like me? Would they hate me? What about Tiffany? Would it be just like when we lived in Germany? My father and his new wife liked us at first and then hated us more and more as each day passed. Our own mother didn't want us and refused to allow us to live with our dad and step-mother. Would this family be as good at deceiving the world as my family was? How should I act? What should I say? Why were they allowing us to come and live with them? Here was this woman, this stranger, taking us into her home like the orphans we had become.

The car came to a halt. Putting the car in park, Caroline shut off the engine. As we stepped out of the car, Tiffany and I stayed close. We were nervous. Following Caroline, we headed up the porch that offered the danger of a splinter if you slid your hand along the handrail in the wrong way. As we waited behind her, she knocked on the door. A woman, about the same age as my mother or step-mother, swung open the door. Her dirty blonde hair had been freshly teased and sprayed with AquaNet. Her lipstick was pink with the crisp outline that only precisely placed lip liner could provide. Her beautiful green blouse was tucked into her black slacks. She motioned for us to enter her house. "Come in, come in," she exclaimed. The smile never left her lips.

Stepping through the threshold, we found ourselves in a beautifully clean house. The air was warm and the décor was welcoming. Two boys sat on the couch watching television. They must be the sons. Our two new brothers. The one on the left was thin with a mushroom-style haircut, definitely a hairstyle of the times. He seemed like he was stylish and probably around my age. Nervously, I noticed both of the boys were inspecting us as we inspected them. The other boy, younger, shorter, and chubbier, with brown hair, looked like his clothes had been carefully

selected by his mother. Although this was our first experience moving into a stranger's home, you could tell that this was not their first encounter with strangers moving in.

Caroline quickly introduced everyone. "This is Heather and Tiffany and," turning to the woman with the warm smile, "This is Mary." Then, pointing to the boys on the couch, she indicated that the one on the left was Tim and his brother, on the right, was Kreig.

After awkward "hellos," we left the overstuffed couch and our new brothers watching television behind. In the dining room, we saw a set of windows beyond the wood table that revealed a spacious backyard with a tire swing. Wow! A whole backyard just to ourselves? My sister and I were instructed to sit at the dining room table with Caroline and Mary. Not able to grasp any of the information that was being talked about, I tried to soak in all of the details of my new surroundings from my chair. To the left of me were the windows. Directly in front of me was a set of cabinets that separated the dining room from the kitchen. There were no dirty dishes in the sink and none on the counter. Pots that had been used days ago were not sitting on the stove, and everything seemed to have a place and was in it. To my right was the living room that we had just left. Family pictures lined the walls. An old wicker chair, surrounded by fake flowers, sat in the corner. Mary and Caroline were deep in conversation. Still, I could not pay attention. Tiffany seemed to have the same look of fear combined with awe in her eyes. As they wrapped up their conversation, Caroline got up to leave.

Tiffany and I were still scared. We had only known Mary for moments, mere moments. Were we really being left alone with these people already? What if they don't like us? What if we don't like them? Caroline can't possibly be leaving us here. Alone. We are only ten and eleven. We need family to take care of us, not strangers. Were Tiffany and I going to be the only family we had for the rest of our lives? We have already lost so much. We cannot lose each other too.

But it was true; Caroline was leaving us alone with this strange family. She put on her fall jacket, grabbed her black purse, and made her way to the door. Mary graciously let her out and then locked the door behind her. Click. Such an ominous sound.

Turning around, Mary excitedly proclaimed, “Let me show you around your new home!”

Our new home? How strange. A house we had never been in before with people we had met seconds earlier was our new home. At the end of the immaculate kitchen, two doors faced each other. One door led outside. We didn’t go that way. We took the second door that led into a basement. She showed us an area that was meant to be made over into a playroom and also showed us where the washer and dryer were. A washer and dryer in our house? Something Tiffany and I had certainly never seen. What was even more amazing was that all of the clothes were in a hamper, not lying all over the floor. The musty smell of the basement bothered me though, and I couldn’t wait to leave it behind.

Back through the kitchen and dining room, Mary led us down a hall. First door on the left, Mary’s room, door on the right, bathroom, second door on the left, Tim and Kreig’s room, “And this is your new room.” She opened the door at the end of the hall to reveal a room with bunk beds and two dressers. On the floor, in the corner below the window, sat a twelve-inch, blank-and-white television with an Atari. A hamster cage sat on one of the dressers. “Go ahead and get your bags and unpack! This is your new room. Do you like it?” We did. We loved it! We would again be sharing a room. We would still be together. We went to the living room to grab our stuff. Our new brothers were still sitting there watching TV. As we walked back and forth through the house we tried to absorb its perfection. The only other time we had lived in such a clean house was in Germany. Nervousness coursed through our veins. As we emptied our bags and filled our bureaus, Mary stared in disbelief at the limited collection of clothes that we owned.

She promised to take us shopping soon. Tiffany claimed the top bunk and I the bottom. That's how it always was. I don't know why. I was afraid of falling off. Tiffany was always so much braver than I was. This was the beginning of our new life. One that was only suppose to last for six months.

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"We need to talk." Such ominous words. It was spring, maybe summer. Tiffany and Kreig were playing in the backyard. Fighting was probably a more appropriate word. That's all they seemed to do. Tim was in his room drawing. He was such a good artist. Buster Bunny, Plucky Duck, and Dizzy Devil, characters from "Tiny Toon Adventures," appeared in most of his artwork. My favorite was when he drew Babs Bunny.

Mary took me into her room and closed the particle board door behind her. She didn't want anyone else to hear the conversation we were about to have. Taking up most of the room, her bed was neatly made with a cream-colored blanket stretched out on top. The blinds were closed and pretty lace curtains matched the pillows. We sat down next to each other on the bed. I stared at my hands.

"As you know, the time you and Tiffany were supposed to stay was six months. That time has come and gone. I need to talk to you because Tiffany can't stay any longer. She doesn't get along with Tim and Kreig, and she's too hyper."

My eyes grew wild as I dared to make eye contact and declared, "But Kreig's hyper too!"

"I know, but he's my son, and I can only handle one child that acts out. The reason I need to talk to you is because I want you to stay. I love you like my daughter, and I don't want you to leave. But, if you want to leave with Tiffany, you can. I want to warn you though. You two will not end up at the same foster home. There aren't any homes available that are willing to take in

two sisters. You would have to leave her and go to a new foster home all by yourself.”

All by myself? Without Tiffany? Could this really be possible? How could we not live together? I love her. I love her with all of my heart. She is the only person in this world that I have. She has been with me since the beginning. So what if she is hyper? So what if you are unable find it in your heart to love her in the way I do? If you love me as much as you claim, you would let me to keep the one person I love more than anything! Finding my voice, I pleaded, “Why can’t she stay too?”

“It’s like I told you, Heather.” She seemed tired of explaining herself. I was not even twelve yet and she was talking to me like I was an adult. “She’s too hyper. She doesn’t get along with Tim and Kreig. She doesn’t respect me. She just doesn’t fit in our family.” The list of accusations went on and on.

Doesn’t fit in? She is my family. If she doesn’t fit in, how can I possibly fit in? I wanted to stay with her. I’ll leave here. I don’t care. I just want to stay with my sister.

“Well, I’ll just take my chances then. I’ll go with Tiffany. I want to stay with her.”

“Heather, you’re not listening to me. If you leave, the two of you will not get put in the same home. You will have to move to a new foster home all by yourself, and she will go to a separate one by herself. Don’t be foolish.”

I needed more time. I wanted to talk to Tiffany alone. What would she say? What would she do? I can’t make this decision without talking to her. “Can I think about it?”

“No, I need an answer now. I have to call DSS and let them know how many girls they need to find a new home for.”

I was silent. I didn’t want my sister to leave me. How could this be possible? It’s not possible for me to live without her. But she is leaving. I have no choice in the matter. It’s not fair. What

do I do? I already know Mary and Tim and Kreig. I won't know the new family. I'll have to start over. Again. If I can't stay with Tiffany, why should I leave too? Tiffany would tell me to stay. Wouldn't she? Why does this feel so wrong? I am making the best decision. Right? I told Mary I would stay. Her smile grew large. She gave me a big hug. Her perfume was stifling. "I think you're making the right decision. I love you." She got up to make her phone call. I left too.

Slowly, I made my way down the hall to my room and shut the door behind me. The bottom bunk was calling my name. The pillow was so soft. I curled up into a ball and faced the bumpy white wall. Squeezing my teddy bear, tears stung the corner of my eyes. I forced them to stay in. If Tiffany decided to walk into the room we shared, she could not know. She could never know what I had just done. I would never be able to forgive myself. Betrayal. I had betrayed her. I had betrayed our sisterhood. I had betrayed the only family I had left. If she ever knew, she would never forgive me.